Offer Love to the Lowest of Victims

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Offer Love to the Lowest of Victims

by FlipstheCrypt

Summary

Ink went too far and Error is gravely injured. Error wants to live, and Ink thinks that he cannot exist without an antagonist. So they agree to fuse until Error recovers.

Paperjam has a mind of his own, and he decides to help the Multiverse quietly by opening a daycare in the omega timeline. Young survivors flock to his care while their guardians can assist Core!Frisk in bettering the timeline, and he's even made some friends. And nobody knows that half of him is the destroyer of the multiverse! Everything is perfect.

One day, Paperjam opens the daycare door to find a shorter version of a familiar face, a face that causes the minds behind his existence to destabilize. Will he be able to hold himself together? His existence, and Error's life, depends on it.

Chapter 1: Flashbacks and Falling Apart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Paperjam wakes up in his studio apartment, his phone buzzing beneath his pillow. Grumbling, he shoves his hand underneath it without lifting his head, grabbing it and peering at the screen. 7AM. Time to get going.

He slides out of his light gray comforter and grabs a purple sweater from on top of the covers, pulling it over his semisolid skull. He finds his orange basketball shorts in the same fashion and steps into them, pulling them up. He then turns to find his apron, scanning the room. It laid on a chair near his desk, crinkled slightly like a tea stained page. In all actuality, it might actually be paper, or some horrible fusion between cloth and paper. It rubs on his bare bones in all the wrong ways. *It's disgusting. It should be burned, and it's ashes thrown into the sea.* Paperjam's eye twitches at the thought as he grabs it.

Wait. That wasn't a thought of his own. That was more than likely Error, a part of himself that Paperjam would consider a devil on his shoulder. But he knows that his apron, as well as most of his belongings, are safe from these destructive urges. Error can't control him directly, only nudge him to act the way *he* wants to. The best he can do is make his eye twitch and make him question his sanity.

With his homemade papron equipped, he grabs his backpack, prepacked from the night before, and starts to leave his apartment. He locks the door behind him and takes in the morning sun before he starts walking. The sky is pastel here in the omega timeline, illusion and creation magic patching up what would be a black and white day/night cycle. It's soft and almost liquid, and the clouds constantly morph with it. It's a beautiful day outside, and a beautiful day is a promising one.

One thirty minute walk later, he's arrived at his own daycare. You wouldn't expect Paperjam of all people to be running it, but there were many kids brought to the omega timeline, and somebody has to take care of them while all the adults work with Core!Frisk and other leaders of the community. It's a quiet, peaceful way of helping even the Multiverse as a whole. Considering the circumstances of his very existence, quiet is for the better. He unlocks the daycare and steps inside, flipping the sign hanging on the window from 'closed' to 'open' as he passes. He flicks the light switch upward, and as the lights above flicker on…

“Radtastical mornin’ my chimichongo!”

Paperjam would jump out of his skin if he had any. He substitutes this lack of metaphor with tripping over his own leg with a jolt, almost falling to the ground with a yelp of pain.

“Fresh! What the heck! How did you even get in??”

“I’m here cuz I’m totes hyped for another wicked day at your tubular daycrib, yo!” The child Fresh dances around the question.

“I… okay,” Paperjam relents as if he was arguing at all, consciously slowing his breath. “but don’t scare me like that! I almost kicked you into the stratosphere!”

Fresh only smiles wider, his shades blinking from ‘YOLO’ to ‘SURE’. “Looked more like you were dropped from your unrad puppet strings, but believe what ya wanna, stringy broski dude,”

Paperjam has calmed down, working on getting the daycare ready, but he feels his eye twitch as Fresh teases. *Puppet? Stringy broski dude?* Paperjam observes this paranoia that Error shares with him instead of pushing it back. Fresh has a way of talking to him that makes him want to be cautious, but at the same time, Paperjam knows he’s just a kid. Everyone knows about kids who see the ghosts of long past relatives, and even an infant can sense things about adults. But its more than Error who feels like it might be something different.

Soon after Paperjam shakes off this uncanny feeling, more children start to arrive. The first is a child version of Underswap Sans, who was brought by a much older version of himself. Then, six year old Dream and Nightmare, who arrive alone. Nightmare smiles up at the caretaker, Dream holding his hand and staring at nothing, smiling weakly. Next are mini Horror and Dust, dropped off by a cat monster, purple with electric blue tufts coming from his big ears. A young Classic shortcuts into one of the small plastic chairs while nobody is looking and promptly plops his skull onto the round table in front of it, falling asleep instantly.

A few minutes pass before one more person arrives at the door. Paperjam opens it and looks down, seeing Core!Frisk smiling up at him with blue strings wrapped into their fingers that lead to a very small Error a few feet behind him.

“I still don’t wanna go. This is a waste of everyone’s time!” the small Error grumbles, his voice distorting in irritation.

“It’s okay Error. I promise you aren’t a waste of time” the greyed Frisk assures.

“I didn’t say *I* was a waste of time! What the hell are you implying?”

Paperjam smiles. The younger version of Error is what many would call a little turd, but he loved him for it. He reminds him of himself, in a weird way.

“You aren’t a waste of my time, Error. Now get your butt inside before Fresh comes out and starts trying to hug you!” Paperjam jests.

Error retracted his strings from the Frisk’s hand, rushing inside to find refuge from the 90’s kid. Core!Frisk nods a thank you, and fades away, likely to divert more attention to another part of the multiverse. Paperjam looks up at the sky for a second, then returns inside, happy to have all of his kids present. Palette sits in one of the chairs, likely having shortcut-ted to the daycare unnoticed. He sits with Swap and Dream, seemingly leading them in drawing. Swap butts in occasionally, making suggestions in what they should draw next and why. Dream sits there, eagerly listening to his best friend announce that they are going to draw a person, a tree, and a house. Paperjam vaguely remembers reading an article about art therapy mentioning those three objects. He wonders if Swap is trying to replicate that.

It wouldn’t surprise him. That kid can do long division in his sleep while reciting Shakespeare by memory.

He decides to leave them be and not interrupt their flow, passing them for Horror and Dust sitting alone at a table. They have Legos sat in front of them, but neither have touched the plastic pile. He pulls up a chair unannounced, sitting with them.

“Hey guys,” he chirps in a friendly tone, Horror turning to his attention. “Whatcha up to?”

Horror points at Dust. “He can’t pay attention, and I don’t wanna build by myself. I ain’t no building guy.”

Dust doesn’t respond, idly pushing a green brick between his fingers, staring blankly at the table. Paperjam furrows his brow, watching him. Kids can play however they want to in his daycare, but this wasn’t playing. Dust wasn’t here at all. Either this is him needing to move, or he’s on autopilot, pretending to play so he can float away. Paperjam sees this often in a lot of these kids.

He slowly pushes another brick in between the child’s fingers, then watches. Then another, and more until Dust realizes something changed and leaves his mind, looking up at the caretaker with an unreadable expression.

“Hey buddy,” he gently calls to him, smiling. “can you tell me how many bricks are there now?”

“Uh,” He counted them, pointing at each one slowly. “seven?”

“Yep, that’s right. Now what does this sound like?”

Paperjam picks up another brick, holds it an inch or so from the table, then drops it, letting it clatter around.

“Like, a lot of clacking…”

“Good. How do you feel?”

Dust looks at his hands, frowning. He shakes them, fine white powder flying off of his sleeve. He looks back up to Paperjam.

“I feel dusty.”

“You *are* dusty,” Horror sneers. “You’re always dusty, because you don’t listen to Mr. Benji and take off that jacket. Or do you? Do you, and when its clean you sneak out and-”

“Shut up!” Dust snaps, his tone changing drastically as he slams his fist on the table, making the bricks slide around a bit. “Just shut up! I’ll hurt you!”

Paperjam inserts himself between the kids, facing Dust. “Woah woah woah. Dust! We do not tell people that we’re going to hurt them!”

Dust sinks into his chair pulling his hood even lower onto his face. “I know… I didn’t mean it.”

Paperjam softens his tone. “I know you didn’t.” He turns to Horror. “And Horror, we don’t goad people into being angry. That does nobody good.”

Horror’s attention was set on the Lego bricks instead. “Are we building or not?”

Dust slowly peeked out of his hood and gave him a confused look. “We were building?”

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Two hours have passed, Paperjam and Palette have been managing the daycare without mush issue. Despite Dust’s small outburst, he began playing and eventually started acting like his normal self. The kids were all getting along like usual, and snack time went well despite
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Horror trying to bribe Palette for more food in exchange for services like ‘making your enemies go away forever’. Swap had offered his snack instead, and Horror let off of Palette. *Kids are funny,* Paperjam thought to himself as he watched.

Just then, a strange knock echoed from the front door. It sounded like someone was banging on the door with a large baseball bat instead of their fist. Even more peculiar, Paperjam never gets kids at this time. It’s basically the omega timeline’s version of noon currently, when almost everyone is working, either with Core!Frisk or on keeping the community afloat.

Paperjam makes sure all of the kids’ needs are attended to before walking to the door, idly entertaining this curiosity. Whoever stands on the other side gets impatient, banging clumsily onto the wood with whatever they are knocking with just as the dark skeleton lays his hand on the doorknob. *Jeez, this better be important* he couldn’t help thinking to himself as he turned it and pulled the door open. When his eyes fell onto the new guest, he froze in place.

“Good afternoon, sir…” the battered child greeted nervously, almost stuttering. “are you Mr. PJ?”

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He didn’t understand why this multiverse’s timeline was abandoned by it’s protector, nor why he was the only one who was willing to take his place. He stood in the ruins of Dreamtale, which was torn apart by the seams. There was no tree, and no kingdom of suffering in it’s place. There was no sky, no sound, and no life. There was only debris and dust on the wind.

The Dream and Nightmare of this world are gone too, he thought to himself. *I hope that they are safe.*

He steeled himself, pushing himself to investigate further. He inspected the destruction, and the rubble was natural, no strings or red Xs marking the ground. This wasn’t done by this multiverse’s Error, and if an X Event had occurred here, the perpetrator was clever enough to cover themselves up.
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At least, that's what he thought. He has no idea what he's doing, truth be told, and he's basing his assumptions on information that might not even be true to these timelines. Even worse, he's never actually protected a multiverse before. He's a child version of a hero, and a very weak one at that. He's not even sure he'll survive the first hour of being here. The possibility terrifies him, and that fear only grows with time. Suddenly he feels that anxiety spike, and something, *someone,* behind him shuffles.

"Well then, aren't you a fun-sized treat?"

He spins around, whipping his out his over-sized weapon and holding it offensively, but nothing is there. Dread fills his empty chest as he starts to notice movement in all corners of his vision, omnipresent but just out of sight.

"Who… who are you? Show yourself!" He yelped out, fear saturating his shaky voice. The movement ceases for a moment, and he turns again, facing nothing but a destroyed world. The wind has stopped now, leaving him alone with this unseen threat. This moment doesn't last long, as something cold and damp taps on his shoulder. He yelps, falling backward as he faces his very first enemy.

Nightmare stares down at him with hands in his pockets, a tendril receding into his back. The protector scrambles away on all fours, barely able to keep his weapon with him. This only earns him a widening grin.

"Whatever seems to be the problem? You look like you just saw a ghost, or worse, your worst nightmare." Nightmare teases, not moving. The protector finds his way to his feet, putting himself in a defensive position despite knowing all too well that he would never be able to defend himself against this cruel, powerful being. *I can't, but I can't run either, not now. I have to protect this place!*

Nightmare tilts his head, sensing his weak courage. "Just what do you think you're doing here? The inhabitants of this world are long dead, and there's nothing-"

"You're just saying that to scare me! You don't scare me!" The protector shouts, shivering to his empty core. "You have to leave! I'm not afraid to fight you!"

Though interrupted, a low chuckle oozes out of the king of negativity, and he steps closer, making the protector tighten his grip on his weapon. Nightmare takes his hands out of his pockets.

“I wasn’t expecting a fight,” He muses, stopping feet away from the small guardian. “but if that’s what you want, then I am more than happy to humor you, *Ink.*”

Tendrils lunge out of Nightmare from where he stands, and the young Ink reacts just in time to summon a purple stroke of his brush to block them. He jumps back, but he doesn’t move fast enough when one of Nightmare’s attacks snakes back to him, slamming into his skull and sending him and the brush flying to the side. Ink lands on his back, grabbing the brush as more tendrils slither above him with pointed ends, trying to plunge into his tiny chest. He manages to divert them away with the handle, and they bounce off of it, curling. He swipes, red paint covering these ends and making them sizzle.

If Nightmare found this acidic substance painful, he didn’t let it show, standing in place with his arms crossed as his tendrils shrink back to him. They flick off the paint and thrust onto the ground, pushing and propelling him towards Ink. His lunge is interrupted as he hits a wall of purple paint, his weight bending it’s elastic form. Ink appears behind him the tip of his brush red once again as he prepares to strike him with it. His tendrils curl around it’s handle, yanking it up and out of Ink’s reach.

“You know you won’t even come close to winning this fight” He uses a free tendril to curl around Ink, lifting him off of the ground. “I find it… cute, that you even bother to try.”

Ink struggles under the pressure as Nightmare squeezes him, barely able to breathe. He rips a handful of smaller brushes from his pocket, jabbing their tips into the tendril. Nightmare relents enough to allow him to escape his grip, and Ink swipes the air with purple strokes beneath him. He bounces off of the stringy lines, flying up higher into the air. He reaches for his bigger brush with one arm, swiping red paint at the tendrils trying to stop him with the other. He misses once, and that is enough for Nightmare to hit him off course, making him slam down into the barren earth below. The pain erupts from his ribs, and in seconds it spreads through his entire body. He rolls over, but Nightmare’s foot presses into his collarbone, pinning him down. Two tendrils curl around his wrists, ripping them up above his head. All he can do is kick and squirm under the weight.

Nightmare grins and leans over him, grinning widely. He reaches down with his hand, hooking the satchel holding his vials with his finger. He tilts his head as he examines them.

“What are you doing? Let them go!” Ink commands weakly.

“You don’t really have a use for pain, do you? Some of these are nearly full.”

“What are you talking about?”

He uses his tendrils to slip three out of their pockets, lifting them into view so that Ink could see their colors clearly. Orange, green, and yellow. *Energy, creativity, and joy,* Ink quickly named them in his mind.

Nightmare slips these vials into his free hand, holding them in a grip. Ink struggles harder underneath him, kicking him to no avail, trying to yank his arms free with no success.

“I can help with that.”

“Stop it! Please! You can’t do that to me! You cant!”

His grip tightened on the vials, slowly increasing until multiple *chinks* echoed into the wind between them. Bright colored paint starts to drip from his fist, mixing and splattering weakly onto he ground. Ink tries to turn his head, look away, but a tendril grips his skull and forces him to watch these emotions drain away. Tears threaten to spill down the young Ink’s cheekbones as he squeezes his eyes shut for what feels like hours.

Suddenly, the weight disappears from above him, and when he opens his eyes again, Nightmare is walking away, tossing the paintbrush to the side.

“I would love to toy with you more, but I am a very busy person.” He looks over his shoulder, a satisfied expression resting on his face. “Besides, you’re going to be a great help

for me. Until next time, Ink."

With that, Nightmare short cuts away, leaving Ink on his own.

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"Are you Mr. PJ?" Ink asks Paperjam, still visibly battered from his earlier encounter. Paperjam stares down at the kid, feeling *something* boiling up inside of him. To say the feeling was overwhelming would be an overstatement, but he draws on every last drop of willpower to keep it inside him.

"… I'm sorry, I can just, you know, leave-"

"No!" Paperjam blurts, his composure cracking. He immediately corrects himself. "I mean, you don't have to leave. I am PJ, yes… Come on in kid!"

Paperjam smiles as he steps aside for the young Ink to enter, gesturing inside awkwardly. He watches the young skeleton enter, and he closes the door behind them. Ink sticks close to Paperjam, looking at all of the other children in the room. Young Swap, Dream and Nightmare look up for a second from their game, but quickly look away. Horror and Dust stare, and almost everyone else is too focused on play, snacking or sleep to notice. Paperjam watches as Ink scans each and every one of them and *oh god just go somewhere already I need to get out of here!*

"Yooooo wassup newbie!" Fresh exclaims from beside Ink, making both him and Paperjam jump. Ink doubles over, clapping his hands over his mouth. Black paint starts to leak between his fingers.

"… Oh. That's totes not radelicious homie! Bathroom's this way, cmon broski!" Fresh grabs Ink by the shoulder and starts dragging him to the restroom. *A blessing in disguise,* Paperjam thinks to himself. He forces himself to ignore Ink, who has spilled himself halfway across the room, and retreats to the daycare's office.
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The office is small and simple, two file cabinets, a swivel chair, and a desk covered in documents about various goings on in the daycare. Paperjam shuts the door behind him and falls into the chair, resting his skull in his hands as he props it up on the desk with his elbows. He sighs, his eye twitching and eventually holding itself in a half squint. His very body feels like its ripping itself in half, but he forces the sensation to cease. *Not yet,* he thinks to himself while he processes what happened in the past five minutes. Finally, he pulls out his phone from his pocket and calls the only other worker who might actually be free today. He puts the phone up to his ear and waits.

"Hey PJ!" Goth greets from his end of the line, friendly and relaxed. "How are you doing man?"

"Hey," Paperjam replies. "I'm doing my best, as always. Hey, listen, are you busy? I need someone to come in for me,"

"Oh shit, is everything okay? You don't usually leave in the middle of the day like this," Goth's tone shifts to concern, and Paperjam can hear him shifting from whatever position he was in. "and I can come in today, yeah."

"Well, my… my *thing* is flaring up. You know how it is." Paperjam eludes.

"Okay, I'll be there soon. See you soon"

"Yeah, see you. Bye" Paperjam hangs up, shoving his phone back into his pocket. He rubs his face, trying to get that damn eye to quit twitching. He cannot do this at the daycare. He stands up and leaves the office, looking for Palette.

Palette isn't really hard to find, as he's scrubbing away at the mess Ink had made. It's *almost* out too when he spots Paperjam, and he stands up from his hands and knees. He smiles, letting his rag hang from his hand at his side.

"Welcome back PJ! Is everything okay? You kinda rushed to the office back there."

“Yeah, I’m okay. I just need to take a break today. Goth is coming to help out, though, so you should be good right?”

Palette nods at him, his gaze softening into sympathy. “Of course I’ll be good. I hope you start feeling better soon though.”

“I’ll try,” Paperjam nods, turning his head to the door when he hears someone shortcut from the other side. “See you later Pal.”

Paperjam takes his leave, greeting Goth briefly on his way out. Walking briskly to his apartment, he looks up into the pastel sky, the blues having faded into a gray omen of rain. *How thematic,* he thinks to himself bitterly. He can feel the splitting sensation building inside of him as he gets closer and closer to his apartment, which makes him walk faster. He cannot do this in the open, where everyone can see. It would be dangerous for everyone involved.

Once the building is in his sights, he abandons his caution and breaks into a sprint for the door. He yanks it behind him, never letting him stay still. He feels like a shark, like he has to keep moving or he would not survive. But he knows that it’s not his safety that he’s concerned about. He rushes up the stairs to his floor, then down the hall to his door at the very end. He hastily pulls out his keys, his hands blurring from printer ink gray, to paper white and screen black, like the two shades are pulling themselves away from each other. He shoves the key in and twists it, shoving the door open with the key and pulling it out as he enters.

He slams the door behind him with his back, and the shark is now still. He slides down the door, shakily crumpling to the floor as his form becomes increasingly distorted. He grips his skull as if trying to keep it together, but he doesn’t know if he can. Fighting to keep himself whole *hurts,* and he doesn’t even realize he’s screaming, sobbing with fat tears rolling down his face. Suddenly, he throws his hands down, gripping his clothes.

“Fine, fine!” He cries loudly, trembling in agony. “I can’t do this anymore! Have it your way! I don’t care anymore!”

And then Paperjam *splits.*

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! This chapter of Offer Love to the Lowest of Victims marks the very first work I have ever posted ANYWHERE so I am so happy that you made it to the end! Updates will vary from weekly to monthly depending on access to wifi and motivation.

Feel free to share your criticism in the comments! I want to learn about writing!

EDIT: I should probably mention that the Palette/Goth will be happening later in the story I am so sorry to those who were looking forward to it in this chapter

Chapter 2: Arguments and Adults Talking

Chapter Summary

> Ink and Error wake up in Paperjam's apartment, briefly staying to fight. Meanwhile, an adult conversation is scheduled.

Chapter Notes

> Hello! Do you wanna beta read? Perhaps even edit or co-author? Well I would absolutely love to talk to you! Shoot me a DM on Discord! (@someguycalledflips)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ink slowly gained consciousness leaned up against a door in a one bedroom apartment. He was seeing double, and at first all he could hear was white noise. Eventually, the empty ringing in his ears faded and his vision cleared, and now he could properly perceive the angry figure in front of him currently shouting at him.

"What the actual *fuck*, Ink!? Are you even listening to me?" Error stood in front of him, his form distorted from his code. "Fucking- Motherfucker! ***Answer me!***"

"Jeez Lois, I can hear you!" Ink groaned, reaching for his vials. "Come on man, I just woke up…"

"Oh my god are you seriously going to drink that shit right now? This is important!"

Ink looked up at Error and was about to snap back, but he couldn't find the emotional energy for it. Further reason to ignore him and pop a few into his mouth. Soon, he found himself standing up, mentally revitalized.

"Okay, now that emotions are out of… in the way? Whatever, why did you split us?"

“Oh, you know why!” Error screeched, pointing his colorful finger at Ink. “You know exactly why I’m upset!”

Ink took his scarf and examined it, then he took out a pencil and jotted down the words ‘just woke up.’ Then he shows it to Error.

“You sure? It says I just woke up.”

“*You downed literal paint to come up with that response!?*” Error brought his other hand to his eye socket, pulling out strings. He flings them in Ink’s direction… but they fall limp as Error doubles over in a coughing fit. He wraps his arms around him, shaking violently with each wheeze. Blood splatters onto the floor below his face.

Ink almost reaches out to him, but pins his arm to his side instead, smiling. “I believe it also mentions that you’re kinda dying, Error.”

Error grips himself harder, but it doesn’t stop the red life spilling from his now agitated wounds from soaking though his clothes. *It’s been months…* Ink thinks to himself. *If he’s still this bad after this much time, how long until a full recovery? Will there be a full recovery?*

Ink keeps his smile plastered on his face as he writes these thoughts down. It’s best that he doesn’t help Error anyway. Not only would he flip his shit, it would also wound his already broken pride.

Error manages to bring himself together, glaring at Ink. He speaks in a calmer, but still angry tone.

“Fine. Since you’re being an immature asshole…” He wipes the corner oh his mouth, a red streak crossing his cheekbone. “What the hell is with the mini you? I already have to deal with one of you twenty four seven!”

“Well, one, there is a child version of *you* already, which honestly isn’t all that much of a change-” Ink sidetracks slightly, then blinks, staring at the wall. “… I don’t remember my second point.”

“Come the fuck on- ow…!” Error growls, but trails off into hissing in pain.

“Oh yeah! I think I was going to remind both of us that I don’t control PJ’s actions. So this isn’t at all a me problem.”

This was true for both of them, but their tendencies and thoughts have been proven to hold sway over Paperjam one way or another. Especially when he was first created, when he woke up in an empty battlefield with two voices in his head and no idea who he was. And with one immortal being of creation and one powerful being of destruction making up his entire being, who knows what would have happened if Core!Frisk didn’t find him there?

Core!Frisk took Paperjam in, led him to the omega timeline despite knowing that he was half Error. But they did sit him down and make him promise that he would never split in the omega timeline, because Error could not ever be left alone here. He promised.

And here we are, Ink thought. *Breaking promises that could get us both kicked out of this place. I hope Frisk is busy…*

“Look, bastard,” Error spat, snapping Ink back to reality. “I hate you. And I hate that kid. And I hate that abomination that I am half of. But I know I can’t just *leave,* so, lets just not be involved with the kid more than necessary okay?”

“And if PJ does that on his own…?”

“I leave.”

Ink rears back, blinking. He holds up a finger, slipping the red vial out of his sash.

“One moment please.”

He drinks a sizable amount, sighing when he swallows it all and slides the vial back in. He takes a deep, calm breath, clasping his hands together. Then he speaks.

“What the hell!? You’re seriously going to *kill yourself* because PJ let in a kid that looks like me!?” He shouts, shooting his arms in the air around him. “And you say *I’m* an immature asshole!”

“I am not going to kill myself!” Error yells back, drops of blood spraying from his mouth. He chokes for a moment, but clears his metaphorical throat before yelling some more. “I can find some other sorry ass who will help me! I’m stable enough to last a week! I can leave right now if I wanted to!”

“Then why don’t you!?”

Error clenches his fists, stiffening his stance. It takes him a moment to respond.

“Well, I just *don’t wanna!*”

Ink glares at him, his face twisting into rage. *If only I didn’t depend on him,* he thought. *I could just kill him right here!* But he did depend on him. A protagonist needs an antagonist, and the creators decided that Error was the villain of the story nine times out of ten. Without him, he would fade into obscurity.

“Fine then! If you really think you need me that bad, then stay! I could care less either way!”

Error opens his mouth to say something, but for once he actually holds his tongue. He pulls his red undershirt forward, peaking down into it. He sighs.

“I want to go back now. I’m tired of this stupid back and forth thing.”

“You literally started it though.” Ink growls. He realizes he overestimated Error’s energy, and how much of it he was willing to spend on a tantrum. Artificial anger still courses through Ink’s bones.

“Does it look like I give a shit?” Error retorts childishly. “I wanna go back to Paperjam!”

“I thought you hated-” Ink is interrupted by a successful string attack, getting pulled closer to Error. He smells metallic and dusty, but there’s a faint note of chocolate under all of the odors of death and murder.

“We are going back. *Now.*” Error insisted with a low growl.

“… Did you leave a chocolate bar in your pocket before out last fight?”

“Shut the fuck up and fuse with me Ink. I’m tired.”

“Fine! Jeez… Just let me go so I can actually do it-”

Error’s strings relent, and Ink pulls out his brush, painting a circle on the ground. The iridescent color is almost indescribable, just when one thinks they know which one it is, it shifts ever so slightly. It’s a very powerful creation magic very few guardians know, and Ink is very lucky to be one of them. He steps closer into the center of the circle, and with the snap of his fingers, it comes to life, floating and spinning in the air before rapidly shrinking. Ink and Error are pulled closer and closer to each other, until Ink’s vision flashes to nothing but white.

Paperjam wakes up on the floor, breathing heavily. Remnants of the conversation his halves had echo in his skull, but they’re distorted by both perspectives clashing together. And the remaining red paint that Ink consumed is now in *his* system, which only adds to his anger he

has at himself for letting any of that happen. He sits up, pinching the bridge of his skeletal nose.

“Fuck you guys. Both of you.” He mutters to himself, sighing.

He gets on his feet, going into his kitchenette. It’s not very impressive, only a fridge, microwave and a sink, and its basically a part of his small living room. He crouches by the sink, opening the cabinet underneath, rummaging through his meager supply of cleaning products.

“Will any of this even clean up blood?”

~~~~~

Palette watches over the new kid, who he’s learned his name to be Ink, with both curiosity and caution. Almost all of the children who come to this daycare are survivors of some sort of violence, and he knows that even adults each react differently to trauma like that. Some grow from it, like Swap, who loves to help others in any way he can. Some become hypervigilant, like Nightmare and Dream, though the young prince of positivity tries to hide how he’s affected. Some become violent themselves, whether they had to in the name of survival like Horror, or if they are mirroring things that they have witnessed like Dust. And sometimes they fall into depression, because there is no way a child would normally want to sleep all day like Classic. Error has his own reasons to be violent, and nobody can get a read on Fresh, nor does anyone know where he comes from. So Palette studies Ink to figure out just exactly how he works, and how to approach him.

Admittedly, he has no idea how. Paperjam leaving immediately after Ink showed up thew him completely off, and he finds himself questioning himself.

“You good Pally? You’ve been staring at this kid for half an hour.”

Palette jolts out of his train of thought, jerking in Goth’s direction. “Goth! Didn’t see you there… was I really staring for that long?”
~~~~~

Goth lets out a soft chuckle, floating three feet off of the ground. “Yup. But I don’t blame you either. He looks like he just escaped a war zone or something.”

Goth was not at all incorrect; the damage to his clothes and body seems all too deliberate for any other explanation.

“I know. But something is still- whoop!” Palette narrowly dodges young Error, who was screeching and running away from Fresh. Regaining his balance, he suddenly remembered that they were in a room full of children.

Goth picks up on Palette's hesitation to keep talking, and turns his head to the clock on the wall. He turns back to face Palette. “Maybe we should talk after work. How’s that sound?”

He thinks for a second, nodding. “Yeah… that sounds good.”

A few minutes after Goth leaves to fulfill his daycare duties, Palette realizes that nap time is imminent. He starts dimming the lights in the daycare, which has Dream, Nightmare, Dust and Classic start heading to their cubbies and pulling out their bedding out of subconscious routine. He then announces it to the rest, and though he gets some mixed reactions, eventually everyone complies, except Ink, who begins painting on the floor.

“Erm… I know you didn’t come with anything to sleep with, but that doesn’t mean-”

Ink holds up his finger as he works with his other hand. “No. Wait.”

While it doesn’t seem like much but childish vandalism at first, a moment later a soft green bedroll springs to life from it, and every stain on the floor disappears. It glows softly with magic, but the light fades and Ink rolls it up and starts carrying it to where everyone else is. But he stops, turning back to Palette.

“I… I like the color green. And it’s okay that you’re staring a lot. Night, mister.”

Ink turns back to the group and sits on his freshly created bedding. Palette watches him hesitate, then crash onto it like he hasn’t seen sleep in centuries. Palette glances at Goth, who is making a quiet beeline for the office door. His deathly friend notices his gaze.

“Ordering lunch,” Goth mouths, near inaudible. “The usual?”

Palette nods, and Goth disappears into the office, closing the door.

Chapter End Notes

Omg guys I am so sorry that I haven't updated this thing for so long! I was having a lot of struggles with mental health and my relationships, and recently I was diagnosed with what they call one of the most painful mental disorders :')

I recently started writing another, more casual fic named Diary of a Star Sans, which I plan to use as filler content since it's pretty simple in concept. I hope you enjoyed this chapter and perhaps are interested in my new fic!

Chapter 3: Pressure and Patience

Chapter Summary

> Goth and Palette chat over a candle lit dinner, Paperjam meets someone at the grocery store, and Ink makes some friends.

Chapter Notes

> Thank you to Neon Draws Sometimes for being my first beta reader!!!! I hope you and everyone here have a happy Valentine's Day! Remember that there is more than one love <3

“Whew. Okay. First time at Goth’s. You got this, don’t be weird.”

Palette grips the cardboard drink carrier at his side, staring into the closed door in front of him. He is trying to psyche himself up, but doing that for something so easy feels… odd. He shakes his head, hoisting his beverage offering up into what will be Goth’s line of vision and knocks. And at first, no response comes from the other side. After a moment, Palette checks his texts, and he is indeed at the right apartment. So he stays silent, straining his sense of sound.

And what he hears is quiet, controlled chaos. Metal clashing against plastic, a lid trembling on its container, water sizzling on some hot surface, and most notably, a string of curses whispered in Goth’s voice. And seconds later, as if nothing had ever happened, the door opens.

“Hey Pally. Didn’t expect you to be so early.” Goth leaned on the door-frame, smirking.

“I’m ten minutes late actually. Y’know.” Palette gestures with the drink carrier. “Spiderbucks.”

“Oh… Oh shit! Coffee!” Goth snaps out of his embarrassment as soon as he feels it, instead fixating on the coffee. “Caramel frappe, and with no whipped cream! You know me too well Pally.”

So it is *the drink you take into work every day,* Palette thinks to himself. “May I come in?”

“Sure dude! I’ve got stuff going on the stove, if you’re hungry.”

Goth indeed have something on the stove, and he wasn’t done. It seems he was making shrimp Alfredo with a side of creamy spinach, but there’s two extra sauce pans which seem to be caked with burnt *something.* And the kitchenette smells of a combination of various meals and failure. And light smoke hung on the air. Palette smiled, looking around the apartment.

It had a similar floor-plan to Paperjam’s place, which makes sense since this is the same building as his. Small, but comfortable. Efficient. LED strips line the ceiling, and they emit a smooth violet. The couch has miscellaneous items piled on one side, as well as his entertainment system and coffee table. Messy, chaotic. But not dirty. There isn’t a speck of dust in this apartment despite the clutter. Palette found that somewhat intriguing. But before he can ask how Goth keeps his house the way it is, he notices something.

The dining table sticks out like a sore thumb. It has a white table cloth that is perfectly placed, set with two fine china plates. Painted onto them are white lilies outlined in blues and blacks, with dark green stems. Forks sit on the right side of each. A vase with two black roses sits at the center right of the table. Palette notices that they had their thorns removed. And in the center, an undyed pillar candle, it’s wick white.

“Are you…” Palette hesitated. “… trying to impress me?”

“Um. Yeah. Weren’t you trying to impress me with the coffee?”

“Touche.”

Goth chuckles quietly, seemingly calmer about his cooking. He stirs the spinach, adds the shrimp and the Alfredo to the noodles, and minutes later it was done and cooled. He floats to the table with the meal, serves one portion to Palette and one to himself before sitting down. He reaches for the candle, but hesitates.

"… Too much?"

"I don't know. Might look good in the violet actually." Palette tries to envision the soft warm glow of the candle contrasting the smooth, cool violet. *Yellows go good with purples* he thinks.

"Aight. Bet." Goth takes a lighter out of his pocket, lights the candle, then sets it back in the center.

"So, let's get business outta the way. This Ink kid came alone right?" He rests his head on interlocked fingers.

"Yeah, but that's not unusual." Palette shakes his head. "Dream and Nightmare came in without a guardian."

"That was a very special case Pally. The day they came was like nothing the daycare has seen, or will ever see again."

"I know, I know. Something is different about Ink too though. He made a bedroll out of paint! Creation magic is not only rare, but really hard to master. Heck, I can barely make basic shapes!"

Goth straightened for a moment, then returned to his natural posture. "Okay, that is impressive. But why would a master at creation magic be a kid that looks like he just lost a fight?"

It hits Palette. *Ink lost a battle! Oh my stars no wonder he was so timid!* He props his face up by his fingertips, sighing. Goth tilts his head.

“You okay there Pally?”

“… Yeah. Just thinking.” Palette lays his arms at the table, looking Goth’s way. “That’s not the only thing that bothers me though. What about PJ leaving?”

“I agree. Dude didn’t sound sick, just pained. And then he was fine when he left.”

“Yeah, I noticed that too. But he was still rushing home when you came to take over. Why is that?”

Goth only shrugged. “No clue.”

Palette would have said the same, but something was gnawing at him. He sat in silence for a very long moment, staring at his pasta. *Ink comes, PJ leaves*…

“… I think it’s Ink.”

Goth does a double take. “The kid?”

“Immediately after he arrived, Paperjam excuses himself acting like he’s being pulled in two. Is that not weird?”

Goth considers it for a second. “Yeah… Maybe it’s a personal thing.”

Palette nods. “We need to talk to him about it. If he’s struggling because of Ink, what message does that send to him?”

“Well, yeah… not tonight okay? Too fresh.”

“Fresh as in-”

“Yes fresh as in soon,” Goth chuckles, the weight in the air lifting when he smiles. “I wouldn’t jinx us like that. Unlike *someone.*”

“Whoops,” Palette laughs, warmth returning to his soul. He smiles at Goth. You’re right though. Let’s just eat and hang out tonight.”

The two skeletons finally start eating their shrimp Alfredo, which was surprisingly still warm. It’s an awkward silence for a little while, but Goth pipes up.

“So, you know creation magic?”

~~~~~

Young Nightmare and Dream walk around the omega timeline, having nowhere else to be and having nothing else to do. They *could* be helping this timeline and it’s inhabitants, but Nightmare feels that they aren’t respected due to their age. He doesn’t even bother reading their feelings, he’s convinced that it’s the case.

It’s raining, but the brothers have been through worse weather living in a magic tree. Nightmare holds his hand up to feel the cold drops on his skeletal palm. It feels nice. The dark gray sky is easy on the eyes, and the clouds swirl in beautiful motions. Soft thunder rumbles above, causing his yellow clad brother to jump, yelping. Nightmare quickly grabs Dream’s hand, rubbing it. Dream squeezes back.

“It’s okay, it’s just the weather. It can’t hurt you.” Nightmare smiles at Dream.

“I… I know. It’s just scary…”

“I know.”
~~~~~

They continued, Dream hiding behind Nightmare now. Nightmare looks down a street leading to Town Square, and he decides to lead his brother down the path. He opens himself up to the energies they are approaching; most feel uncomfortably hot and fuzzy to him. He shuts himself off again, then nudges Dream, waving his hand towards the square.

“It’s leisure, I think. Enjoy.”

Dream smiles slightly, sheepishly returning to Nightmare’s side. The little prince of pain could feel his brother using his magic to blanket himself in tonight’s warmth. Truthfully, he couldn’t shut himself off from everything, and he always had some idea of what people were feeling around him. But Dream’s aura was especially strong. He didn’t mind of course, he’s grown used to the special way his brother hurts him. And it’s only fair, knowing that he can hurt his brother too.

Not that he wants to. He’s already hurt as is.

Nightmare continues this train of idle thought as they arrive at and walk through Town Square. Then, as they slowly pass store windows only Dream bothers to look into, he starts thinking about his thoughts. *I’m really mature and well read for the age of six,* Nightmare thinks. *It’s kind of scary.*

Just then, Nightmare feels a tug.

“Look! It’s the new one!” Dream points into an alleyway.

Nightmare is confused at first, and he continues walking thinking that his brother wanted something from a shop. When he is pulled back, he finally looks down the alley.

Young Ink stands at it’s end, scrounging around a dumpster from behind what seems to be an art supplies store. Nightmare tugs back.

“No Dream, we aren’t following him. He could be dangerous.”

“He’s not! He’s hurt! I can feel it! I wanna help-” Dream tries pulling back, but Nightmare has a strong hold.

“No! He stinks of bad intentions!”

“They aren’t his!”

Nightmare was about to deliver a final denial, but he stops to humor Dream’s crazy excuse. He hones in on Ink’s energy, and he feels a deafening crash of—

Nothing. Nothing is going on in there. Well, the faintest sensation of cold, dull pain, but that isn’t the intention he was feeling. It was coming from someone else.

“… Fine. I believe you. Let’s not startle him.”

Nightmare lets go of his brother’s hand, and together they walk closer to the strange new kid. Ink struggles to climb into the dumpster, unaware of the brothers’ approach. He jumps, climbs, then falls down with great frustration.

“Hey, you!” Nightmare calls out, making Ink’s gaze snap towards him. “What are you doing in that dum-” And before he could finish, the artist child attempts to flee. Dream steps forward, reaching out to him physically.

“Wait! We can help you! You’re safe with us…” Dream calls, a sickly sweet energy flowing from his hand and, thankfully for Nightmare, towards Ink. Ink, who stops when the energy reaches him. Though the comfort and security that Dream infects Ink with is very strong within him, Nightmare notices another, fainter feeling. Realization, and a tiny spark of hope. The strange kid turns around and runs towards Dream.

Really, really fast towards Dream. So fast, that Nightmare doesn’t quite have time to react-

And before anyone knows it, Dream is on the floor, Ink is on top of him, and Nightmare is desperately trying to pry him off.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing!? By the Roots you’re fucking strong-”

“Language!” Dream barks with tears in his eyes, which startles only Ink. Still, he clings on.

“You’re the answer! You’re who I’ve been looking for! Stars-”

“Let go of my brother!” Nightmare interrupts. To which Ink responds by letting go so fast that Nightmare is thrown back as Ink stands up, unaffected. Ink gives him a confused look, fiddling with his.. ammo belt of paint? Nightmare is both dazed and confused.

“Brother…?” Ink questions, literal question marks in his eyes. “But I fought his brother. Are you sure you aren’t from different timelines?”

“What… Roots, Dream, I think I regret letting you help him-”

“We’re both from the same timeline…” Dream catches his breath from being squeezed. “He’s the only brother I know…”

Ink blinks, and shapes with bright colors appear in his sockets. “Well, if that’s the case, then great! The more the merrier!”

“And what do you even need our help with…?” Nightmare questions.

Ink’s eyes turn to darker colors, softer shapes. All of the energy in him is sapped away. “Well… it’s a long story. Like, very long.” Ink takes out some paint from the weird ammo belt sling on his shoulder. It’s in a glass tube marked with a blue soul-like shape on its cork. He screws it off, drops a bit on his tongue, and closes it back up. He blinks, with colors and tears to match the pigment.

“I… I don’t have a soul. I can’t feel anything, so I drink this magic paint, like medicine… But all of the good feelings, their vials, they got crushed… And… and-” Ink suddenly collapses, sobbing. Dream almost reaches to help him, but Nightmare holds his own hand up.

“Let him feel this. He needs to.”

Not only that, Nightmare needs him to. In a timeline where everyone is eternally grateful, it’s hard to come across despair to absorb. It’s just a fact of life for him.

“He… he only left the bad feelings behind! I don’t know what to do!”

“Wait, he?” Dream pipes in, finally recovered from Ink’s assault. “Who is he?”

“He’s another Nightmare. A corrupted Nightmare…” Ink sniffles, looking at his little blue vial with defeated looking punctuations in his eyes. He puts it back in it’s place.

“A corrupted me? I don’t know what that is. All the bad guys I’ve seen look nothing like me.”

“He doesn’t look like you. He’s grown, and he’s made of evil! I fought him before coming here.” Ink gestures to his injuries and torn up clothes.

“A being made of evil…” Nightmare thinks. “I think I understand. So why did he take some of your emotions?”

“That’s the thing! I don’t know what he’s planning. And I’m scared…”

“We’ll figure it out. But first, we need to help you get your emotions back. You said it was paint, right?” Dream smiles, helping Ink get up.

“Mmhm. I was trying to see if they had any in here,” Ink trailed off.

Nightmare shook his head. “Not likely. Let’s just go inside and ask, okay?”

~~~~~

PJ looks down the aisle, almost wistfully, as he spots the chocolate displayed on the shelves. H e knows he shouldn’t. He knows its mostly Error subconsciously begging him to get some. And that he’s only considering it because he has had a really bad day.

He’s been needing to go grocery shopping for a while, but it’s not a comfortable errand to run for him. Aside from Error and Ink attempting to influence his decisions and making him spend all his money, the lighting stings his eyes, and the mix voices, footsteps, squeaky wheels, and music on the intercom… he can’t explain the feeling, but it really fucking sucks. *What you need…* a thought not his own suggests, *is one of those noise canceling headphones.*

I don’t need crap. PJ mentally responds. *Too expensive.*

Chocolate is also an option. A reward for dealing with these abominations.

You can always draw them.

Do not use the devil’s paintbrush I swear to god-

PJ blinks after feeling his eye twitching, and he sees a small, gray hand offering him a bar of chocolate. He looks up, and he sees hollow eyes staring at him, and a gray human child crouched where a normal child would normally be strapped in in the basket.

“Here, this is on me.” Core!Frisk’s voice is soft with kindness, but they frown still. PJ looks away.
~~~~~

“I fucked up.”

“You tried so hard. You did everything right.”

“But I failed anyway. I did everything to stop myself but I couldn’t. You know that means I have to go.” PJ’s voice waivers, his eyes watering on top of the stinging. Guilt’s tendrils crawl into the empty space in his rib-cage, weighing his chest down and drowning him.

“PJ…” Core!Frisk leans to the side, looking into his eyes again. “There is no way you could have known that a young Ink would come to you…”

PJ looks back at the human, not sure what they are saying. The world seems to freeze, and PJ remembers everything that he has done for the kids at the daycare. How much they improved from when they first arrived. The petty drama between them. The horrifying stories they would share, all of them their truth. What would he do, would *they* do, if he couldn’t be there?

And his friends, Goth and Pally. What would he say to them? Would they even understand why he needs to go? And if they did, would they see him as the villain that makes half of him?

“… But he needs you. They all do.” Core!Frisk looks at the chocolate in their hand, shifting their hold as to not melt it too much. “I forgive you, you know.”

“What are you saying?”

“You have one more chance before I will intervene.”

Woah. What? PJ is so caught off guard that he can’t breathe. What??

“Under one condition. You cannot let Error unfuse from Ink. Ever.”

There it is. PJ loses the breath he was holding, suddenly bombarded by foreign thoughts and a colorful mix of emotions.

“But, the kid… What about the kid?” *What about us??*

“I know you are strong enough to handle it. Things will get better, I promise. I suggest taking the day off tomor-”

“I’ll be fine.” PJ straightens himself, eye twitching. Core!Frisk is demanding a lot from him, so telling him to neglect his responsibilities alongside that? Hell no. He’s not letting a child tell him to take the day off.

“… If you say so.”

Commotion sounds behind PJ, and he whips around to see a display of… Crystal Pepsi? Knocked over and spewing clear cola everywhere? Didn’t that get discontinued in 1994? PJ turns back, only to see his cart void of anybody. All that is left is a chocolate and it’s receipt. He picks it up and turns away from the candy aisle, beginning to unwrap the bar with his teeth. He almost makes it to the aisle he’s been needing to go to, when he hears the strangely loud sound of a soda being opened.

“Ooooooooo, someone totes in mad trouble!”

Chapter 4: Kombat and Konkussions

Chapter Summary

> Fresh haunts PJ at the grocery store, complete with thunderclaps and dead soda. Meanwhile, Nightmare and Dream take Ink to the art supplies store to stock up on his colors, and Goth kicks Palette's bony ass.

Chapter Notes

> Not beta read, ending rushed. Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> “Fresh!” PJ screeches and nearly throws his candy into the ceiling. Which would have really fucking sucked. “You scared me! What’s up with you?” He manages to settle into a kinder tone, but Fresh didn’t seem to care.
>
> “Wazzup with you, broski? And how’s the inside fam?” Grinning neverendingly, Fresh points to PJ’s chest with his soda. The gesture makes PJ shudder.
>
> “I’m… fine.”
>
> “Don’t lie to me.”
>
> The florecent lights flicker above as thunder claps outside, as if Fresh could command the lightning. His wide smile only gets wider, eerily so.
>
> “I heard what Frisk was layin down on you. But am I surprised? Nah.”
>
> “What are you talking ab-” While he wasn’t really interrupted, PJ was cut off by Fresh’s little pointer finger, held up while the litte twerp was leisurly sipping Crystal Pepsi.
>
> Satisfied by the taste, he sighs and lowers his hand. “I’m not done. And yea, I knew about your, hm… let’s call it your origin story. Makes it sound more radtastic, right? Like Spiderman or somthin’.” He screws the lid back onto his drink, his other hand raising to adjust his shades. The YOLO design blinks away, and in their place are colorful elpisises. Smile’s gone. “You don’t really feel like a hero, do ya?”

“Fresh, what is your problem?” Throwing his arms up, PJ glares down at him. “So what, you know. I’m not hurting anyone, and you’re not getting anything out of threatening to blackmail me.”

“Who said I was?” The shades’s design changes again, reading ‘BRO WUT’. Fresh shrugs, mimicking, maybe even mocking PJ. “Blackmail is so uncool. Unradical. And I don’ want anythin from you. I know what yo’ crib looks like. Death Valley would be totes jealous.”

“Okay **SASS**hole.” Cursing earns PJ a frown from the tiny throwback in front of him, but he could care less. “I didn’t come here to get insulted. I came here for groceries. Bye.” He turns on his heel and begins pushing his cart away. Except, when he looks into his cart, Fresh is settled comfortably among the boxes and produce.

“You wanna hear this broski.” He folds his arms behind his head, leaning back on a bag of lettuce. “That Inky bro’s gonna cause major issues. But he’s not unrad, not completely.”

“Get out of my cart. Now.”

“You can help the lil bro. But that means breakin a few rules, ya hear me, my homeslice? My dogslice? Brotato chip?”

Like a momma cat to her kitten, PJ grips the scruff of Fresh’s jacket and lifts him out of his groceries. The kid’s limbs are limp until his feet touch the ground, where he stands now, and his shades flash to ‘MEOW’ before returning to their original design. *Weird ass kid,* he and his other parts agree mentally.

“Go home Fresh.”

“Fine then. You’ll see.” More thunder roars outside, and the lights cut off for an entire five seconds. When they come back, Fresh has vanished.

Whatever. PJ rips open his chocolate the rest of the way, and turns his cart into the pasta isle. All he needs is some alphredo sauce and some fettichini and he is out of here.

~~~~~

Ink wasn’t expecting Nightmare, this younger version of him, to be at all interested in helping him, but his kindness is already apparent. Because here they stand, in front of a shelf of acyrlic paint. The brightest hues, the deepest shades, and the softest pastels of every color perceptible to the eye. They warble together, through his thick, grateful tears.

“This will work, right?” Nightmare’s question pirces Ink with uncertainty. A dark corner of his mind whispers that he did so on purpose, but a hand gently lays on his shoulder.
~~~~~

“I’m sorry. I get that you’re nervous. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“His curiousity gets the best of him.” Soft giggles escape Dream, nearly inperceptible.

“Hush, you! You aren’t supposed to make fun of people!” Nightmare leans back to see past Ink, to see his brother. Both of their smiles are contagious, even with his weakening sense of joy. Which reminds him…

“I sure hope it works. This isn’t something that happens a lot.” Reaching for the brightest yellow he can see, he reads the label. The hue calls itself Goldenrod, and on the back it claims to be non toxic. Quickly, he reaches for the green and orange of the same brand, rather, the ‘Margarita’ and ‘Road Work Ahead’ colors. “Why are paint companies allergic to HEX codes?”

“What’s a hex code? Sounds magical.” Dream disengages his brother in their play argument.

Nightmare snorts. “It’s a color code.”

“They have codes?”

Ink is starting to realize why paint companies are allergic to HEX codes. “Yup. And I got what I need.” Ink starts to hide the bottles in the folds of his paper scarf, among the neglected reminders he’s jotted there. But Nightmare grabs his wrist, a little too harshly.

“No! You are not stealing those!” How can someone yell while whispering?

Ink’s tears distort Nightmare’s image. “I can’t-”

“I can.” From somewhere under the folds of his clothes, Nightmare produces a coinpurse. It’s a leather bag that would be more befitting of medeival times. “We don’t like advertising it, but me and Dream are pretty well off.”

Ink blinks away the tears, but he doesn’t need clear vision to see and hear the size and weight of the coinpurse. He feels almost stupid for asking, but…

“How did you get all that?”

The Prince of Pain stows his gold away so swiftly that Ink isn’t sure where he put it. “Being a hero pays well.”

With that, they head for the register. None of their heads clear the counter, so Nightmare climbs up onto Dream’s shoulders for a better view of the cashier. Manning the cash register is some purple cat monster, and as Nightmare rises in front of him, the cat’s expression grows ever more amused.

“How can I help you, sir?” It’s not exactly sarcasm, but the cashier’s voice carries humor for the kid tower.

“I’d like to buy- cmon Ink pass them up-” Nightmare waves up, and Ink clumsily gathers the paints on the counter, the surface completely obscured by it’s height compared to him. “I’d like these acyrlics.”

The cashier begins scanning. “Of course. Y’all got paintbrushes, by the way? OmegArt is on sale.”

“No need!” Ink chimes in. “Just restocking!”

“Yes, we’re just restocking. What, trying to upsell a kid?” Nightmare raises an eyebrow at the cashier, and Ink isn’t sure if he’s serious in the accusation. Besides, would it matter? Nightmare said he was stacked.

But the cashier isn’t offended either way, wearing a cool smile. “Of course not. You’d be surprised how many forgetful artists there are. Myself included.” The bottles are promptly bagged, and set on the counter. “27 G is your total.”

Nightmare digs into his coinpurse, and produces the exact amount in one calculated scoop. The cashier counts it all, and scoops it all into the register, printing off a receipt and passing it to Nightmare. “Y’all be careful out there. I don’t like how that storm outside looks.”

“Me neither. We might get struck by lightning or something. Who knows.” Nightmare shrugs, taking the reciept in one hand and reaching for the paint in the other. The brothers’ center of gravity shifts from this movement, and Dream begins stumbling backwards. Nightmare feels himself moving back, and in an effort to balance leans forward. Both efforts overcorrect the issue, and both brothers begin to fall forward.

To Ink, it all happens in an instant. The cashier is leaned over the counter, hoisting Nightmare up by the pits. Dream’s face is planted firmly into the side of the counter, like a sad dandilion. Eyes wide and feet dangling just above Dream’s skull, Nightmare shakily holds on as the cashier sets him beside his brother. It’s hard to tell exactly what expression Nightmare is making, or anyone of that matter.

Why am I just standing here? Ink wonders as he absently wipes the tears from his eyes. *I should be doing something.*

Blinking, he realizes that Dream’s up again, and he shunts his awareness into the real world to hear what he’s saying.

“Ink? Are you okay?” Dream wonders. There’s a scrape on his forehead where the counter made aquaintence with it. His eyes are watery too, from the pain. But he’s asking if Ink is okay…

Ink grasps at straws in his mind, but he cannot possibly remember what had him so upset. Was he even upset to begin with? He can’t even find the words to describe the absence.

“Hey, take my hand.” Nightmare instructs, and Ink listens. The Prince’s hand is somewhat bigger, and Ink resorts to taking three fingers while his hand is enveloped in the others. Passing between them is an energy Ink is not familiar with, perhaps some sort of magic? Like a sweet breeze that’s otherwise bitterly cold. And the look on Nightmare’s face, it’s almost like he’s reading something. The moment passes, and Nightmare lets go, brows furrowed.

“What just happened?” Ink asks, not understanding like everyone else seems to. Even the cashier is gazing down on him like he’s familiar.

“It really has been a long day for you.” Nightmare remarks empathetically. It’s clear he wants to say more, but a thunderclap rocks the building and Dream yelps, causing him to shift his attention.

Yeah, but what just happened? Ink almost repeats, irritation spiking through him, but he forces himself to appear calm. Nightmare had done something, and didn’t tell him what.

“Well, at least nobody’s bleeding.” The cashier’s voice draws attention to the first aid kit where the paint was, where Dream pulls out a little pad to dab his scrape with. *When’d that get there…?*

“Yeah, thank you. For catching my brother, too.” Dream smiles through his wince as he disinfects himself.

“Make sure ya’ll watch his eyes. Skeletons can be tricky with concussions, but if they don’t look right, get to a doctor.”

“Will do. Thanks again.” Nightmare gives a thumbs up, holding the plastic bag in the same hand.

At this point Ink can’t help but wonder if he got any of that in order, or if Nightmare, well, either of them, had done something to him.

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Palette and Goth are sitting on the couch, wrapped in blankets that smell like the latter man. The game console has been removed from it’s seat on the couch and placed on the floor near the TV, and two steaming mugs sit on the coffee table. On the screen opposite of the skeletons, two buff humans beat each other senseless. Blood goes everywhere with every strike. Palette’s thumbs are sore from mashing buttons at random. Goth’s thumbs fly across his own controller skillfully. Goth’s buff human, a man in grey combat gear, pummels into Pallete’s buff human, who is wearing sunglasses and has cocky voicelines. Palette’s healthbar is dwindling, fast.
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“Do you want me to teach you some combos, man?” Goth asks as his character uppercuts Palette’s. “I main Johnny.”

“If you main him, why didn’t you pick him?”

“You picked him first.”

“But you could have said something!”

Poor Johny takes one more blow and starts stumbling around the two dimensional stage. The in-game announcer cheers to Goth to finish him, which he obliges by stepping forward and clicking a series of buttons so blindingly fast that Palette couldn’t possibly replicate it. The animation that follows is something that Palette doesn’t even bother to watch, tossing his controller on the table and grabbing his mug. Black coffee soothes his angry soul.

“I think we need to play something else.” Goth suggests gently, turning to Palette. “I’ve never seen you get so worked up. It’s kinda cute.”

The coffee is being spat out back into the mug. Palette’s cheeks heat up at a rate that he thought impossible.

“Scuse me?”

“Wow I did not just say that. Anyway,” Goth floats up, blanket falling off from around him. “I got Minecraft, I got Sonic Racing, uhhhh we could play the Portal 2 co-op-”

“You think I’m cute?”

“-campaign, even though I’ve never played it so I dunno if it’s any good. What sounds good?”

Goth has three CD cases held up like a hand of cards, the front of each facing Palette. Sipping his coffee for the second time, Palette points at Sonic Racing, and Goth takes out Mortal Kombat and slots in that blue hedgehog faster than a console would typically agree with. Thankfully, nothing is broken. As the game boots, Goth floats back to his seat, curling up into his blanket snuggly.

"… You okay?"

"Yup. Feudrian Slip or whatever they call it."

Palette has no idea what that means, but he doesn't pry.

This game is much easier than the last, but that doesn't stop Goth from kicking Palette's ass at first. It feels different though. They play in silence, and while Goth is always passing Palette, he doesn't get first like Palette expects him to. The AI doesn't seem too smart, even on hard.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. I'm, uh, sorry if I made you uncomfortable or anything."

Palette, playing as Tails, passes Goth, who is playing some unrecognizable character that keeps screaming 'PUDDIN!' at the top of her lungs.

"You didn't."

This race goes on for another minute, and Palette wins. Tails is celebrating on the screen next to this Pudding girl, who is standing at second place. Goth pulls out his phone, reading something.

"PJ says he's gonna be there tomorrow."

“That’s good to hear. I can take over for you since you took over for him.” Palette offers.

“Nice of you. Thanks man.”

“… I guess I gotta go sleep then.” Palette sighs. He doesn’t want to go just yet, especially not on such a weird note.

“Yeah. See you later.”

Soon, Palette is walking down the hall towards the elevator. The visit was going so well, but Goth was clearly uncomfortable. *Should I have said something different?* Palette wonders, pressing the down button. The elevator’s sign displays the top level in a flickering red. *Sigh.*

Everyone is acting so strangely lately. Palette pulls out his phone and opens his texts. It’s mostly spam. No notifications from anyone, namely his parents. When he taps on ‘Ol Man’ his screen is flooded with gold as the theme loads. He starts typing, but deletes everything before he can. He’s busy with more important things. Then he opens up ‘Dad,’ typing.

‘Hey. I love you. LMK you’re okay.’

Sent.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the wait! Life has a way of kicking you while you're down, and on top of that I signed up for community college and I'm still looking for a job to work at night. I have a vacation in 3 months that I am not at all prepared for. I've also been off and on with my bf, living with a bitch roommate, and dealing with mental health issues. Hope you enjoy

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